

NEVER WORRY WHAT THE NEIGHBOURS THINK

This is a kind, even loving, book. Given how many different characters make up The Hockneys, it might not have been....

The influence of one's place in the family pecking order never changes, even when we are old and wise — even perhaps when we are the last one standing. As the youngest family member John Hockney seems a little in awe of the older members and their achievements. Later in the book John confides, disarmingly, how he and his older sister Margaret had originally planned to write this extended family history together. But one day Margaret said that she wanted instead to write her own book, and this she did, entitled *My Mother is Not Your Mother* (2017). (I imagine her thinking 'that's telling you, my four brothers!')

The Hockneys is a wholesome story—which may disappoint some readers, anticipating revelations of the bohemian antics of its larger than life character, gay artist David. But there is nothing salacious here, no sexy secrets are revealed. I don't think there is anything new here concerning David's private life or that of his friends and acquaintances. For this reader, the enjoyment is art related, in the descriptions by John of The Wagner Drive and of watching David at the age of 76 working on a portrait in his studio.



Over the past forty or so years, David Hockney has written his own accounts of his artistic life and there are numerous publications recording his paintings as well as the biographical works of others. There is David's remarkable research first published in 2000 called *Secret Knowledge* (updated and reprinted since), reflecting his fascination with camera lucida. His delight in using new technology — fax, iPad and various photographic, copying and recording technologies — is well known. Indeed his Yorkshire accent and eccentric good looks coupled with his use of the iPad and Brushes app in producing his colourful contemporary works have made him influential in many other artists' stories and Ann Warnes in this issue is one of those.

Why does anyone write a memoir? To proclaim one's achievements no doubt for some. Making a record to leave things tidy is probably what many biographers desire to do. Families and historians value such troves of information, as do researchers of novels and film and biographers of the famous and infamous. The Hockneys are a family very much concerned with keeping archives and this book by John Hockney is a perfect example of what is almost obsessive.

While John Hockney set out to write a memoir about a family, The Hockneys, the trouble is his brother David has hijacked the project. by being a public figure and, indeed, a 'national living treasure'. If proof of that were needed, a painting by David Hockney - his 1972 *Portrait of an Artist (Pool With Two Figures)* - sold last year at Christies for over £70 million, a record for a living artist.

A different Hockney biography recently published, *Life of David Hockney – A Novel* by Catherine Cusset, is described as a compelling hybrid of novel and biography. If you are looking to read a racy book about David Hockney and his colourful life, I would recommend Cusset, which, in just the first few pages, has him as a teenager masturbating an unseen, unknown man sitting beside him at the back of the local cinema.

In fact John Hockney's memoir is, like Cusset's, a hybrid of novel and biography but that is where any comparison ends. Near the end of the book he tells of his recent career in promoting oral history and in ghost writing others' stories — appropriate talents for *Never Worry What the Neighbours Think* where he uses the techniques of the novelist in recreating conversations and imagining experiences long past and impossible to recall.

While John Hockney has tried hard to be even-handed with the attention he gives each family member, David naturally gets the lion's share of this memoir. Of course it is hardly surprising that John has exploited the potential to be derived from this serendipity. But trying to be all things to all readers is an impossible endeavour, leaving me wishing that much of the

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very early family history had been left out. There is also some disjoint when the same events are recounted in connection with different characters. The core family story could have been incorporated into a simpler *My Brother David* by John Hockney with much of the historical material left in the family archives.

Nevertheless, this is an unusual and admirable family with an unusual and mostly admirable patriarch who, though working class and often struggling, imbued in his family confidence and resourcefulness. 'Never worry what the neighbours think' aptly describes his approach to life. David is quoted as saying: 'My father's statement is aristocratic, not working class. I have followed it all my life.'

John opens the book with David and signals up front that the lion's share of his attention will go to the famous brother: 'Sharing an attic bedroom with David Hockney from 1943 to 1957, from childhood through mid-teen years, I had no perception he was to become one of the greatest artists of the twenty-first century. He quietly kept his own counsel about his life plan, until he became devious to ensure his future followed the artistic path he so passionately sought.'

There are some delightful characterisations; an especially touching observation is of John's grandmother:

'Every Saturday morning, I pulled my billycart to her house at the top of the hill. Her shopping list was ready on the table with the money wrapped in a piece of paper to make sure I didn't lose it. The greengrocer, butcher and grocer were patronised in order. A half stone of potatoes was too much for an old lady to carry herself. My billycart made it all so easy and I could ride downhill all the way home. Sometimes Grandma was ironing. She called it a sad iron. No wonder it was called sad; it was made of cast iron and had to be heated sat on a swing plate over red embers in the fire. There was no such thing as an ironing board, the corner of the table was used, with a blanket doubled over and a sheet as a cover. Her laundry always looked brilliantly white and crisp.

'When my errands were complete, Grandma made a hot cup of cocoa with whole milk. At home it was mostly water with a dash of milk. We sat in front of a glowing fire, gazing into its deep red embers, she in her rocking chair and I snuggled at her feet. She would see great cities and faces in the embers. I saw them, she showed me. It was quality time, sipping our cocoa and eating her homemade fruitcake with a slice of crumbly Wensleydale cheese.

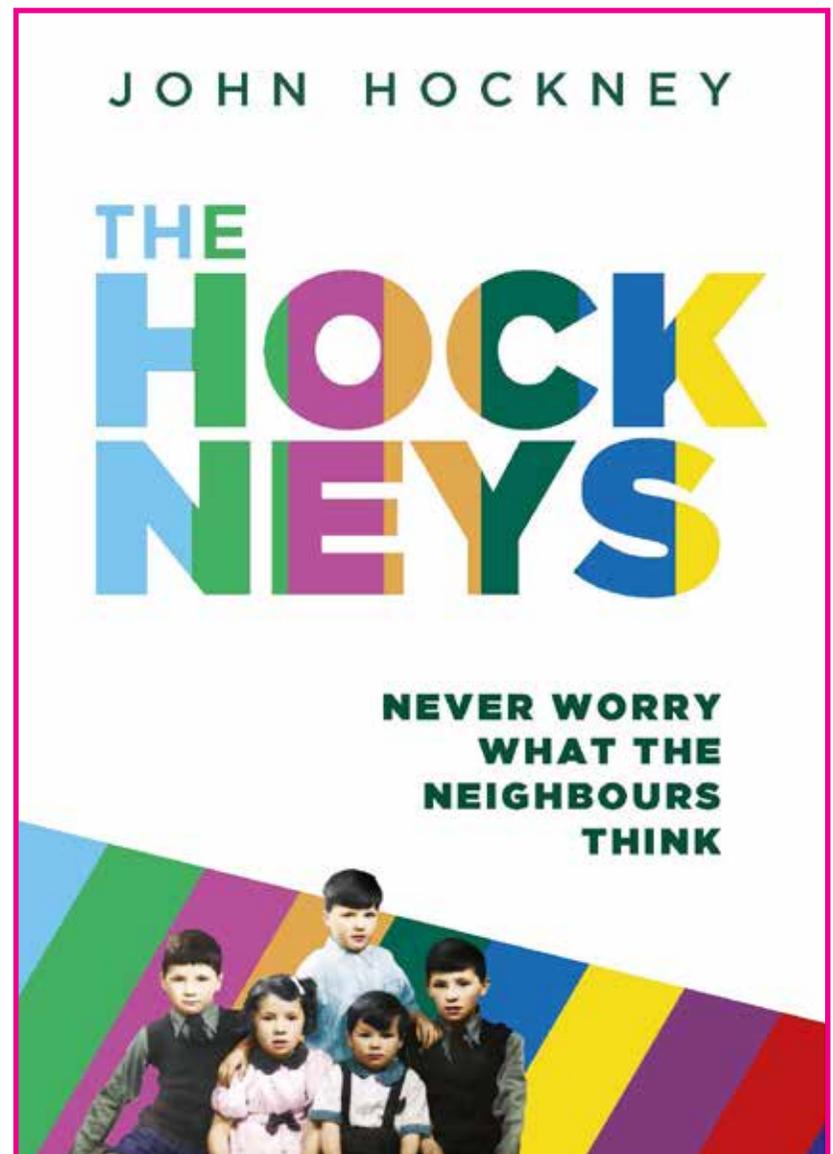
'Her chair rocked slowly as she often dropped off to sleep. A gas lamp burned bright, casting shadows in the corner of the room.

'I would look at her, her silver-grey hair shining in the light, her shiny face virtually wrinkle-free. Small blue eyes sparkled with a lifetime of stories and she wore a contented smile on her face. Thin bony hands, large and prominent arteries extended to her long fingers. Her back and shoulders, slightly rounded, were covered with a thick grey woollen shawl that she lifted over her head when she walked out in the cold. It is my vision of how I remember her before she died.'

We learn that the grandparents Hockney had eloped and only married after the births of three children. John explains: 'Whilst researching family history, I discovered a probable reason for their elopement. Though James was successful in his career at the time of their elopement, he was not wealthy per se. In 1868, a Marriage Bill passed in parliament requiring a pending groom to deposit a sum of at least twenty-five pounds with the registrar, parish priest or minister. Dependent on the wealth of the city or parish, the deposit amount could be much more.

'Providing the marriage took place, the full deposit was returned, however, if the groom jilted, the deposit was forfeited in favour of the rejected bride, and the groom was out of pocket.

'The law I understand was repealed in 1901 and is assumed to be the reason many couples began to marry at that time. Working class men would never have had access to such a sum and, though it was permissible to borrow money from family or a friend, few would have had spare cash, hence the probability of James and Kate Louise's elopement.'



We can picture Hockney senior lugging an armchair on a Saturday morning in order to sit by the public phone and await calls from purchasers of his restored prams and bicycles. The boys delivering finished prams by bus. Dad studying at night to become an accountant.

Included in the book is a vast amount of well researched historical information: wages in '39 were £3.15.0 pw, working weeks were 52 hours without overtime. Wartime, evacuation – this is fictionalised with lovely minutiae. His father was a conscientious objector. Just two months after moving in to their terrace house, workers cut down the decorative iron railings front and back, leaving a signed receipt to say they were being commissioned for the war effort...The decree affected every home with iron railings throughout Britain ...

'Inside the back entrance, a small vestibule held coats and muddy shoes before entering the kitchen/ living room, the hub of the house. The front room was used only for occasional large family gatherings. A cellar became useful for Dad, repairing and renovating bicycles and prams. A cut-out, hewn from a solid stone wall down to the cellar, accommodated a meat safe, maintaining an even temperature all year round. It was to be twenty years before we bought our first refrigerator.

'When I revisited the house after Mum left to live in Bridlington, I was amazed at how small the living room was. Disbelief at how we had all crammed into this room to live our lives, cook, finish homework, wash clothes, iron, and eat meals with up to fourteen people at a time. The harmony, disharmony, laughter, tears and love crowded into this room.'

We can picture Hockney senior lugging an armchair on a Saturday morning in order to sit by the public phone and await calls from purchasers of his restored prams and bicycles. The boys delivering finished prams by bus. Dad studying at night to become an accountant. Father Hockney was certainly an eccentric ...

'He never left the house without a walking stick, of which he kept a rather large supply as he frequently forgot where he left them. Well prepared with an array of pens, pencils, rubbers and a notepad, Dad found writing was second nature to him, and he documented anything he felt important to keep for reference. He sewed or taped extra linings into his jacket or coat, so he could carry newspapers, magazines, books and cameras around on his person, adding a largeness to his torso. He wore homemade badges promoting the harm of smoking or the need for peace....He carried sweets in case he had a hypo but often ate them, having none left when they were needed.'

His parents' frequent arguments were influential in John wetting the bed until he was 14.

A prolific letter writer to world leaders, politicians and church leaders, Dad frequently received answers.... from Gandhi, President Nixon, the Pope, Colonel Nasser of Egypt, Khrushchev, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and many others.... In one letter to the Pope, Dad asked him to sell the solid-gold telephone on his bedside table and give the money to the poor of Mexico. Objecting to British bombing of Cairo, he wrote to Colonel Nasser, receiving an acknowledgement card at Christmas.

Dad's passion for humanity continued, urging bans of all nuclear weapons, abolition of the Vietnam War, as well as his own personal opposition to tobacco companies. A man in many ways ahead of his time, he led a one-man crusade against smoking. He designed and paid for his own posters and badges, pasting them on billboards positioned near bus stops where they could easily be read.

After the death of their father John made an archive of their father's papers, paid for by David. Selected material was made into books by David and John for each sibling.

Their sister Margaret is often credited with introducing David to the new technology which would so dramatically change the way he made his art.

'The day my mother died... Margaret received a new computer. She began to talk to the world...A Scrabble freak, she began playing games with people in the USA, UK and the world. She realised, perhaps having spent time with David, that she too was creative, taking photos of flowers, or scanning them on her scanner, then designing a vase for them. She began to exhibit her pictures.... One year she submitted two pictures to the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.... Both Margaret's pictures were accepted, one of an octopus squashed on her scanner (she spent hours cleaning off the stink and mess). She caused quite a stir when the press then noted her surname was Hockney.

And it was Margaret who discovered the app Brushes, demonstrating to David how it could be of use to him as a new medium.

David 'began to play around with the Brushes app, drawing flowers and items in his room. Every day we received new iPhone drawings to our emails. A short time later he graduated to the iPad. His drawings improved the more he used the app, and he got software to enable enormous prints. His subject matter was around him, in his room, a view from the window, a vase of flowers, the kitchen sink, a pair of shoes.'

An especially informative part of this memoir is the detailed description given by John as he watched his brother at age 76 at work on a portrait.

David is seated and attended by Jean Pierre (JP) his assistant. A blank canvas is placed by JP on David's easel and the chair for his subject is positioned. David has already planned his composition. The subject, Jonathan, sits on the chair on a raised platform with, in this case, a blue velvet curtain as background. Once he is sitting as directed by

David, JP marks around his feet so that he can return to the same position after taking a break. JP positions his digital camera on a tripod.

David screws up his face; he pulls faces as he works. He coughs and he smokes constantly. He focuses on his subject, then with a piece of charcoal makes the first marks that position the figure, allowing the whole body to fit in perfect proportion on the canvas. John tells us that 'all David's portraits are full body rather than head and shoulders. He wants it that way.'

There is complete silence, no music and no talking. No distractions. JP is constantly taking photographs. When David has finished making the first marks he stops drawing and instructs JP on the palette required. JP prepares the colours, photographing everything.

David uses a new acrylic paint with a 4-hour drying time. JP lowers his easel so that David can paint at eye height. John continues his description: 'White, I need white'.

'It is immediately there, and back again to the canvas. I watch David, his eyes on his work – back to Jonathan – back to the canvas as he concentrates on the skin tones of Jonathan's face. His face contorts from time to time as he screws his eyes closed, looking, always looking.

'A quick cup of tea and the short break is over, then... David continues work on the head and face, shadow of cheeks and mouth, and the dark area of eyes that reveal the personal features of Jonathan's face.

'JP clicks the lens open twelve times in the last minute, but sometimes it is many more. The number of photos taken to record a picture must be hundreds as the process the artist follows is documented.'

Once completed, the memory card is downloaded from JP's camera and 'within minutes the painting is reproduced on a TV screen, showing every stroke in quick time. It's mind-blowing to see each recorded movement come to life. David smiles, turning to JP and quietly says, 'very good'.

It may not be what you expected, but this is a biography with gems which are truly worth the read.

Carolynne Skinner

The Hockneys — Never Worry What The Neighbours Think by John Hockney, Legend Press, 2019

Life of David Hockney: A Novel

by Catherine Cusset, translated by Teresa Fagan, published by Other Press, 2019

'John Hockney Talks About His Brother David',

OZ ARTS magazine issue 1 2013

<http://www.ozarts.net.au/images/oz-arts/2013>

-spring-summer/HOCKNEY%20web.pdf

Secret Knowledge - Rediscovering

the lost techniques of the Old Masters,

by David Hockney, Thames & Hudson, 2018

David screws up his face; he pulls faces as he works. He coughs and he smokes constantly. He focuses on his subject, then with a piece of charcoal makes the first marks that position the figure, allowing the whole body to fit in perfect proportion on the canvas.

David's thesis in *Secret Knowledge*, which has been highly controversial, is that the change in style of the masters in the decade of the 1420s (greater visual realism than previously) came about through their use of a concave mirror to project real images. An artist looks down at the drawing surface through the camera lucida, which is glass or a half-silvered mirror at an angle of 45 degrees. This reflects the artist's subject matter in an inverted image. David looked at characteristics in the paintings of artists such as Caravaggio, Ingres and Van Eyck.

